

COMMUNITAS

A New Learning Community
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EXPERIENCE, SUPERVISION, COMMITMENT

Communitas is a two year, upper level learning community, awarding a B.A. through the University Without Walls program of Roger Williams College. We call ourselves a New Learning Community rather than a college so that we do not have to explain ourselves within the narrow restrictions placed on higher education institutions.

Communitas is unique, we believe, in its combination of the following factors. First, it is completely project oriented. Students work on year-long projects under the direct supervision of a project advisor. Second, Communitas is utilized as a resource bank by both students and non-students. Third, it concentrates primarily on rural and small city America. Fourth, the focus is geographically delimited (Eastern West Virginia, Virginia, Southern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and D.C.). Fifth, there is an institutional commitment to community change.

We are planning on establishing six to eight community learning centers throughout the region. A community learning center consists of a large building in a small city (10-50,000) and a farm (100-300 acres) within 20 miles of the city. These centers will implement programs, accept students, and design projects for the residents of the area.

The theory behind this educational effort may, perhaps, be summarized by stating three observations about learning and rural development. First, we believe that in rural America university students are almost consciously taught to ignore their surrounding environment. In part this results from the fact that teachers are recruited from outside the region, and thus have little intimacy with the area's problems. In part this results from the educational philosophy that the young need to be educated in order to gain a degree which will permit them to leave their poor surroundings and find employment in the larger cities. The population curve in most of these areas drops dramatically in the age group 25-35, the years when young men get out of the army or men and women graduate school only to find no jobs. Second, we believe that learning must involve doing, that by being involved in a project students learn not to oversimplify the world in which they live, while at the same time learning that discipline and analysis can produce results. Thus they don't fall into the commonplace malady of most American students---a cynicism stemming from their belief that they know exactly how the world should be yet feel powerless to influence the course of events at all. Third, we do not believe that experience and learning are synonymous. Learning is experience which is analyzed in order to draw conclusions which might later lead to a modification of the original behavior. Thus projects at Communitas are under the continuous evaluation and supervision of a faculty member skilled in the specific project area.

As to the process of education at Communitas, students are accepted only after a specific program has been worked out. This process may take anywhere from one week to two months. Students are then given a list of resource people and groups and materials from Communitas. They work under a project coordinator and spend the first part of their year reviewing the literature, travelling to areas where individuals are working on the problem, interviewing resource people, and doing regular research papers. We hope to have groups of five to ten students involved in each project in order to give the participants the emotional support necessary for these fairly open-ended projects, as well as to provide the possibility of group evaluation.

After this initial period students become involved in contacting community groups or residents interested in the project (or they may already have been in contact with them during the first phase) and begin designing a model and working on implementation.

Tuition goes back to the project, minus an overhead of 15%. This money can be used to hire resource people, to acquire materials or equipment, or anything else the group decides. Too often college students work on models or ideas in the classroom but are never able to test them outside, thus losing both the sense of individual accomplishment and the feedback from the real world so necessary to make education pragmatic and workable. This usually is a result of lack of financial resources. In our projects sometimes the money is supplemented by grants, either from the college or foundations (we should stress at this point that the total enrollment of Communitas will never be more than 400, with this total being divided among the six to eight fairly autonomous community learning centers, so the commitment on the part of the college to these projects will be personal as well as institutional). For example, students researching the financial crisis of a particular city might decide to design a program of tax reform to present before the city council. This would require little project money. But if they should decide to establish a credit union then the college would utilize financial resources for getting a building, publicity, fund raising, etc.

Although Communitas's educational program is not divided into disciplines we are discovering that the real world isn't either. Thus, in our project on home rule in Allegany County students have had to begin acquiring a knowledge about the economics of revenue sharing, urban planning, architecture, statistics, as well as a relevant study of local power structures. We fully expect that a year of this type of education will provide students with a far more relevant and superior knowledge than that gleaned from the best of classroom situations.

We are not adverse to placing an individual in an apprentice-type atmosphere, but only if it is as part of a larger project, and only if we are sure that such a placement will provide a skill. For example, one group of students working with us wanted to research housing assistance patterns in a given city preparatory to establishing a neighborhood housing corporation. One of the students is now working in a real estate firm, and has applied for a broker's license, in order to understand the intricacies of housing assistance in that city.

But we will not place a person in an agency or institution or environment for the full year, nor simply because he or she will learn something new. We believe that students need to feel they are part of an ongoing movement and that they are going to come up with a socially useful produce, much as any craftsman.

With respect to evaluation, we think this type of educational environment lends itself well to evaluation because such evaluation is continuous. In most instances the project coordinator is involved in the project personally. In all cases the students within the group will bring pressure on one of them who is not shouldering the load, because the result will be that the group loses the possibility of making their work known to the community at large. We think such a possibility will provide more realistic group pressure than the fear of one individual (or even the entire group) losing a grade. Students will never be placed in a situation where they don't know how well they are doing until midterm, or finals. If a student is not doing the assigned tasks he or she will probably be asked to leave, just as happens in any job situation.

Communitas is a relatively new institution and therefore our present structure and philosophy and programming has evolved from our experience. We have altered programs when we found that experience indicated a need for a change. We would be glad to assist other educational institutions in developing problem-oriented programs, either similar to those outlined above, or adapted to their own educational setting. We hope you remain in contact.